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Book review- Researching and transforming adult learning and communities

Few of us would disagree with the assertion that there is an urgent need to provide alternatives to the current dominant narrow emphasis in adult education on vocationalism and life skills. This book offers an alternative vision, emphasising instead the community and collective dimensions in adult learning. It outlines reflections and actions on how to research and transform communities in the fields of adult learning and education. It advocates participatory action research as the way forward. The introduction to the book notes that the contributors are 'not interested' in further examining familiar competencies to become employable, but rather seek to provide robust evidence to support the assertion that adult education and learning cannot be understood without reference to community and people's daily lives. They argue that adult education and learning can in fact be understood as a 'real process to help people to read the world and change it'. The various chapters therefore start from the premise that 'to be able to interpret social reality can make all the difference'. The elements the authors consider to be important in making a difference in people's lives are informed by a Freirean perspective, and these are, the collective/community, dialogue and transformation.

One of the great strengths of the book is that it is able to draw from the impressive fruits of the work of the research network Between Global and Local-Adult Learning and Development which meets under the auspices of ESREA. There is a good range of contributing authors, some offering out their work to a broader audience for the first time perhaps. The chapters reflect research and activities which seem genuinely grounded in communities across Europe and beyond including as far afield as Mexico. The themes addressed in the various chapters include the issue of the representation of adult learners in projects and social movements, the importance of dialogue, and the empowerment of adult learners. The case studies include young adult learners in Scotland, participatory experiences in a Swiss literacy NGO, a Bilingual and Bicultural Education Programme in Brussels for children and their parents, and adult literacy work in Turkey.

The book is divided into three sections. This first has the title 'the bigger picture' and provides a framework which sets the scene for what is to follow. This section strikes an optimistic note in implicitly and explicitly stressing how communities and social movements can influence social change and how adult learning can contribute to the achievement of greater equality. In an impressive chapter Bud Hall draws a broad and helpful picture. He outlines the development of international research and practice into community development and critical social knowledge creation through adult education. He identifies alternative sites of knowledge construction such as social movements which can make visible and strengthen the knowledge that is created in the context of people trying to 'change the world'. Hall also makes the plea on behalf of communities that 'knowledge generating' spaces outside of the academy are recognised. Other chapters in section 1 provide other pieces in the jigsaw of the overall narrative, reminding us for example of the crucial role of the educator with important emphasis placed on the Freirean perspective which 'sees educators as starting from people's real situations'. The role of the educator as a 'mediator' is also stressed. A case study from Poland gives a timely reminder of the need for participatory models of community learning, 'encompassing a recognition of community experience and knowledge and encouragement of civic participation and engagement'.

Sections two and three of the book link the themes of development, social change and education. In section two, different case studies examine educators/mediators who work in local and regional contexts in which the tensions of the wider policy and discourse environment impact on all kinds of adult learners. The case is made overall that adult educators need to be ambitious, radical and intuitive. Picking up on the broader theme articulated in the introductory section of the book, the threats posed by neo-liberal individualised versions of citizenship as against 'the collective needs and interests of the wider community and society' are highlighted through the example of young people in Scotland. Key issues of representation and power imbalances in such community contexts are flagged up. Other chapters take these issues forward and for example analyse how participatory methodologies whose stated aim is to give place and power to learners voices can actually help realise meaningful transformations in the way adult learning is done. Another case study stresses the importance of change and conflict in community learning and proposes new functions for the educator as facilitator and mediator in this process. All of the case study authors can make the legitimate claim that their work may contribute to the knowledge of researchers and policy makers.

The third section provides a fascinating window into examples of research inside local communities. It illustrates how social movements can be viewed as emancipatory and as one case study reports are 'engines of change in the context of resistance to neoliberal policies and can generate alternatives'. They are also important learning sites for adults. The case studies show how the 'construction of identity' is central in moments of group and community learning. Participation is key, a project in Portugal reported that through their participation women for the first time obtained the freedom to become partners in local decision-making and community development. Several of the case studies demonstrated that creating a situation in which power is shared to create a learning community can be transformative for all concerned.

This book represents an excellent resource for adult educators, students and researchers keen to understand 'the state of play' regarding research in the field. It might have benefitted from a concluding chapter providing further reflections on what had gone before in the book sections given the diverse range of material presented throughout. However what emerges from the various chapters is a real snapshot from across Europe and beyond of different professional practices, differing theoretical and methodological approaches, and a range of participatory research. It reminds us of the importance of 'communities' and the recognition of them as sites of knowledge creation. It emphasises the need to recognise and support research in the learning processes that take place in communities. It tells us of the significance of the 'collective' in adult learning. The depth and scope of the material described and discussed in the various chapters should also give us confidence that all is not lost, and that the forms of adult education connected to real social change continue to thrive despite the many challenges which serve to devalue citizenship and education.

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